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MEMORANDUM

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TO: List

FROM: B. Jenkins

SUBJECT: OFFICIAL VIEW OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

COPIES TO:

DATE: 12-30-68

MEMO NO.: 9016

While in Washington, I asked the same question that many of the members of the new Administration would ask when they arrived to take over the direction of the war: "What is the present situation in Vietnam?"* To answer this question, a number of documents and briefings are being prepared now at the Pentagon and the State Department. This body of paper, plus what the officials tell their successors in private conversations, may be said to comprise the "official view" of the war. In my attempt to find out what sort of assumptions, beliefs -- and doubts -- existed, I discovered that there were not one, but two official views: the first is the "JCS line," which up until March 31st of this year directed our war policy. The second is the much less optimistic OSD line, of which Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford is the leading exponent.

THE JCS LINE

The exponents of the JCS line are, of course, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the principal spokesmen logically being General Westmoreland, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and presidential advisor Walter Rostow.

The basic assumption contained in this line is that Vietnam is a situation which yields to military force. The solution is to apply more military force for a shorter period of time, the same force for more time, or more latitude (bombing of DRV, operations against Cambodia, etc.) in the application of the force.

Advocates of the "JCS line" believe that:

* I was told that as of December 20, with the exception of some "poking around" by Kissinger, no contact, official or informal, had yet been made between members of the Nixon Administration and the members of the present Administration, either at the Department of State, the Pentagon, or USAID.

1. The Hamlet Evaluation System reports are basically correct; the GVN controls 73% of the population.
2. The KIA figures may be exaggerated, but even allowing for errors, they reflect a degree of punishment that the enemy cannot sustain.
3. The enemy does not have the tactical military initiative in South Vietnam.
4. The withdrawal of the NVA units from South Vietnam was evidence that the enemy could not sustain the punishment inflicted upon him.
5. The DRV was "on the ropes" at the time President Johnson ordered the bombing halt, but now will take advantage of the respite to rebuild its war-making machinery and bolster its badly mauled army in the South.
6. The Viet Cong are cracking, although the presence of NLF negotiators in Paris has given them a psychological lift.
7. RVNAF has improved greatly and should be able to take over more and more of the war effort.
8. The political development has been equally impressive: The development of a constitutional framework was a great step forward in Vietnam; the GVN is improving in its performance; the new political alliance (Lien Minh) launched by President Thieu will coalesce most of the non-Communist factions behind the GVN.

The notion that the war has been won is the most interesting belief of the "JCS line." Walt Rostow states that the NVA are in Paris because they cannot win a military victory, but General Westmoreland goes considerably beyond this, claiming not that we can win or are winning, but that we have already won! Having won, General Westmoreland's 200-page contribution to the literature of the "JCS line"

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is appropriately more a history of the war than it is a plan for the future.* The Joint Chiefs of Staff apparently go along with General Westmoreland's assertion. In a JCS document which will go to President Nixon, they outline the "essential conditions for the cessation of hostilities," which are to be the demands of our negotiators in Paris. They are the following:

1. An effective cease-fire.
2. The verified withdrawal to North Vietnam of all North Vietnamese personnel (including fillers in Viet Cong units) in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.
3. The verified cessation of infiltration.
4. Substantial reduction in terrorism.
5. The return of U.S. POWs.
6. An agreement to reestablish the DMZ with adequate safeguards.
7. No prohibition against U.S. assistance to ensure that RVNAF is capable of coping with residual security threats.
8. Sovereignty of the RVN.

These, in my estimation, are the terms laid down by a victor to a conquered foe, and they do follow logically the claim that we have already won; however, I immediately offered to my informants the disturbing proposition that Hanoi might prove somewhat obdurate in recognizing that it was a conquered foe. What then?

*In this 200-page report General Westmoreland makes the remarkably revealing statement that "the setback suffered at Tet was more psychological than real." The General apparently believes that psychological is not real. And there, in my opinion, is the real history of our conduct of the war.

Continued military pressure would probably crack the enemy in 18 to 24 months, but three things could be done to reduce this period: the bombing of North Vietnam could be resumed, possibly including the dikes and canals; the port of Haiphong could be sealed by air or naval action; and the remaining NVA units in Cambodia could be destroyed. Of the three, the last was most important. According to the conventional military wisdom, the enemy army cannot be destroyed without attacking his zone of communications. Cambodia is the enemy's zone of communications. It is even more important than the supply routes to Laos (these were Army men speaking). According to them, the threat of an effective barrier to infiltration extending across Laos to the Thai border caused Hanoi to begin establishing an alternate supply route through Cambodia. Now that the Cambodian route was operational, operations against the enemy LOCs in Laos alone would be inadequate. Cambodia must be hit, especially since the NVA units had withdrawn there to recuperate.

It seems that the necessity to continue the war or even expand it would contradict the original assertion that we have won it already, especially since both things are said by the same people. However, the contradiction can be cleared up by introducing a World War II analogy (World War II analogies are quite appropriate for this group). They believe that the enemy has been defeated, but not yet entirely destroyed. The enemy's situation in Vietnam is much like that of the German army after the Battle of the Bulge, but before the Crossing of the Rhine. It had been defeated; its destruction was virtually certain if not complete. This analogy can be carried one step further: Unless the Rhine is crossed, the enemy may rebuild and will have to be defeated again. For "Rhine," read the Mekong River, the Cambodian Border, the bombing halt, a time limit imposed by Washington, and other constraints that have been imposed on the military conduct of the war.

There is another view of the JCS claim of victory. The military have failed, know it, and fear they will be blamed for it. Their outrageous claim of victory is nothing more than a cynical plan to exonerate themselves.

The JCS have proclaimed a victory and have set down the terms which the negotiators are to meet in Paris. If the negotiators fail, and the failure is unacceptable, then the constraints imposed upon the military will have to be removed in order to get it over with once and for all. If the negotiators fail to obtain Hanoi's agreement to our demands, and we agree to something less, then once again the "civilians" will have negotiated away the victories hard won on the battlefield. It is an old and familiar tune.

One other belief of the JCS advocates is that the domestic opposition to the war is not deep-rooted but comprised of only a few vocal leftists. The majority of the American people will tolerate continuing the war. This view of the domestic situation is not, in my opinion, shared by President-elect Nixon or his staff. They fervently desire to get it over with fast (12 months) and get some troops home before "Johnson's war" becomes "Nixon's war."

THE OSD LINE

This might more accurately be referred to as the "anti-JCS line," for it concentrates on refuting their claims rather than presenting a single line of its own. Its beliefs are based primarily upon the statistics contained in the Southeast Asia Report, a monthly statistical analysis of the war.

About the only assumptions shared by all the proponents of this line is that Vietnam is not a situation which yields to military force as it is presently applied. Beyond that, there is disagreement as to whether this means we can alter the application of that force to produce a favorable outcome or we should recognize our failure and get our troops home as quickly as possible. The latter is the line followed by the Secretary of Defense.

Advocates of the "OSD line" believe that:

1. The Hamlet Evaluation System reports do not accurately reflect the degree of government control.

a. They are inaccurate because of institutional pressures to report progress (upgrading) when there is none.

b. Using the same data, it can be shown that the Viet Cong exercise some control in 73% of the hamlets. (The reason for the contradiction would seem to be the definition of "C" or contested hamlets -- whether they reflect government or enemy control.)

2. The KIA figures are gross exaggerations.
3. At the present rate of attrition, the enemy can continue to fight for a much longer period of time than the "JCS line" suggests.
4. The enemy has the tactical military initiative in South Vietnam which is based upon the statistics which show that some 80% of contacts with the enemy are enemy-initiated. On this basis, it would appear that the enemy can control his rate of loss, negating any claims that we can punish him beyond what he can endure. *
5. The withdrawal of the NVA units in the fall of 1968 was voluntary.
6. RVNAF has not improved greatly. It has grown in size and it now resembles the U.S. Army more closely. Since our own performance in this war has been poor, resemblances to us cannot be taken as an automatic improvement.
7. The political situation in Vietnam remains poor. We have imposed upon the Vietnamese a constitutional framework which is as inappropriate as our imposition of an American prototype army.

*The JCS could argue that statistics based on who fires the first shot do not reflect who has the tactical military initiative. Furthermore, the figures do not reflect the tremendous punishment that has been inflicted on the enemy through bombing and artillery fire.

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8. The Lien Minh is just another government-sponsored alliance which will attract the usual hundred or so professional alliance joiners in Saigon. It does not represent a coalescing of anti-Communist forces, nor could it survive against the NLF in any open political contest.

Except to state that continuing the present course of action is futile and politically unacceptable, the OSD-liners do not present a single alternative, but rather a number of alternatives which run from "alter strategy to achieve a victory," to "victory is unachievable; therefore, get out."

I think it worth relating one other statement regarding Vietnam planning in the Pentagon. "The planning going on in the Pentagon is merely trying to second-guess what Nixon will decide, not influence his decision. Staff officers have even been assigned to comb his speeches and articles for clues as to what course of action he will follow." If that is true, then Nixon, even before he is inaugurated, has to a certain extent set his war policy, for the briefings and proposals presented to him will be based upon interpretations of what he already has said.

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